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ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

☒ Release ☐ Excise ☐ Deny

Exemption(s):

Declassify: ☐ In Part ☒ In Full

☐ Classify as ☐ Extend as ☐ Downgrade to

Date ☐ Declassify on ☐ Reason

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

DECAPTIONED

July 10, 1978

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Alfredo Bravo, Co-President, Permanent Assembly for Human Rights and President Mrs. Alfredo Bravo  
Miss Susana Dieguez  
(Briefly) Mr. John R. Higgins, Chargé d'Affaires ad interim, American Embassy, Buenos Aires  
Mr. Anthony G. Freeman, Acting Political Counselor, American Embassy, Buenos Aires  
Mr. F. Allen Harris, Political Officer, American Embassy, Buenos Aires

PLACE : American Embassy

SUBJECT : Detention and Interrogation of Alfredo Bravo

Background

Mr. Alfredo Bravo is the co-president and one of the founders of the Argentine Permanent Assembly for Human Rights. He is believed to be a Radical Party sympathizer (somewhere left of center, e.g. social-democrat or socialist of the West European variety), who for a number of years has headed the Argentine Teachers' Union. To the Embassy's knowledge he has had no connection with any terrorist or subversive organization. His abduction in early September, 1977 brought enormous pressures on the Argentine government domestically and internationally for resolution of his disappearance. This memorandum is a summary record of a four hour conversation regarding Mr. Bravo's detention and interrogation.

Preliminaries

Mr. Bravo called Mr. Harris on July 10 stating that he wished to stop by the Embassy to thank Mr. Harris for his help in obtaining his release. At 5:00 p.m. Mr. Bravo accompanied by his wife and the common law wife of one of his La Plata Prison cell mates arrived at the Embassy. Mr. Bravo thanked Mr. Harris and the Embassy for their efforts in obtaining his release. The discussion started out on prison conditions at La Plata Prison. Mr. Bravo stated that the prison's rules are not published and thus are subject to the interpretation of each individual guard. He noted that any small infraction results in the prisoner being confined to the "chanchos" (pig pens).

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Mr. Freeman and later Charge Higgins entered the office and on both occasions Mr. Bravo thanked them profusely for the Embassy's aid in obtaining his release from prison.

#### Detention and Transit

Mr. Bravo suggested that the best way of discussing his case would be to relate in detail what had actually happened to him. He said that on September 8, 1977 he began teaching at about 8 p.m. Shortly after his class began, three men entered his classroom, showed police identification, said he was wanted for questioning, and escorted him outside to a "run-down" Renault IV automobile. He said his hands were handcuffed behind his back but that his treatment was correct as long as the vehicle was in the Federal Capital. However, after they crossed the bridge into the province of Buenos Aires, the Renault pulled off into a side street. He was taken out of the car, punched and then blindfolded by the three men. The men then discussed among themselves that they had to kill him. One questioned if they had enough gasoline to burn him. Another suggested that kerosene would be better as it disguised the body smell better. They again punched him around and finally one man stated that they couldn't kill him because he had to confess first. They then handcuffed his hands in front of his body. They placed eye glasses (he presumed with dark lens) over his blindfold and put a hat on his head and again resumed driving.

After a period of time, the car stopped. Bravo heard the sound of buses nearby. He peered under an edge of his blindfold and noted a modern bar and saw a street sign with 2nd Street on it in the lettering of street signs used in La Plata (the capital of Buenos Aires Province). He saw two uniformed policemen pass by with rifles. He thought about calling to them for help, but decided that they were probably colleagues of his abductors.

A new voice gave orders to his abductors on where to take him. They then drove to another place. There were a number of other cars there, Bravo recalled bumping into several cars before he went up some stairs. When he arrived in the building, the voices in the room went silent.

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At this time, he was stripped naked; his rings and his brief case were taken. A hood was placed over his head. (Bravo noted that hoods were changed throughout his interrogation. He believes that the hoods were of different colors denoting the point at which the person was in the interrogation process. He added that he remained naked and blindfolded throughout 10 days of interrogation and torture. He also had no sense of time during this period.)

#### First Session

Shortly after being stripped, Bravo was spread eagled on a table. His hood was removed. Before any questions were asked, Bravo said a four pronged electric picana was run over his chest from his neck to his waist in what he called a "rastrillo" (rake). Bravo described this as being excruciatingly painful. At the start of this session and all following torture sessions, Bravo said he was addressed with mocking courtesy as "Estimado Alfredo" or "Estimado Bravo" as if to signal what was to come next. The questioning during this session focussed on his relations as a top labor leader with key government figures. He recalled the following specific questions: What connection did he have with Colonel Reston?; What was his relation with government interventors of the CGT?; What was his relationship with General Viola?; What was his relationship with Colonel Longo (the Under Secretary of the Ministry of Labor)? Bravo said that he first mentioned the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights himself. He said that it was his first serious error as the Assembly became the constant theme of his later interrogations.

The first round of torture ended. At this point, Bravo stated he was "so full of electricity" that his jaws and tongue were paralyzed. He stated he was allowed to rest between rounds until he regained some use of his jaw and tongue. At this point, a helpful voice which he believes to be that of his caretaker during the torture process told him do not swallow saliva or drink anything during or after the picana session. A second round of "rastrillo" applications began. At this point, Bravo stated he was unable to communicate. He had no use of his jaw muscles and tongue. Again the same questions were repeated regarding his union affiliations. He was incapable of replying.

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At the conclusion of the second round of picana applications, someone poured water in his mouth. This caused him to choke and to gag as his mouth and gums felt like they were suddenly, grossly swollen. He said he would have drowned if someone had not come and turned his head to his side and sponged the water from his mouth and from between his lips and teeth. He mentioned that during this round he was given an injection in the buttocks. Bravo believes that the injection was some sort of a cardiovascular stimulant to enable him physically to endure continued electric shock treatment.

Another round began with further applications of the "rastrillo". Bravo was not able to recall how many times the "rastrillo" was applied to his body. He remembered that most of the applications were to his chest and some to his ribs on his side. Close to the end of the third round, the "rastrillo" was placed on the back of his neck. He stated that this was the worst as it had direct shock effect on his brain. Mr. Bravo noted that during the second and third rounds he was threatened. He recalled two specific threats -- first, that "we are going to do the same to you as we did to the writer Eduardo". (Bravo believes this is a reference to disappeared journalist Eduardo Sajan.) Secondly, that we are going to treat you the same as we treated (Air Force Junta Member) Agosti's niece. During his torture Bravo said he heard repeated cries from other nearby rooms.

At the conclusion of the last round, he was put in the back of a van with a man and a woman who he believes were dead. He saw through his blindfold a part of a woman's face which was beaten bloody. He was taken to a second place of detention which he described as a "deposito". He alone was taken out of the van.

#### Second Session

When he entered the "deposito" a new hood was placed over his head. After some time he was taken into a room and subjected to a torture called "el cubo" (the bucket). His feet were forced into a bucket of ice water. He said when he tried to lift his feet from the water, someone pressed his knees down forcing his feet back into the bucket. His feet were kept in the ice water for five or six minutes.

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After this time had past, one of his torturers, as if to be nice, said to the others to let Bravo take his feet out. But his feet were then jammed into another pail containing boiling hot water. The pain was intense. After several minutes, his feet were again placed back into the bucket of ice water and the questioning began. Bravo stated that he was subjected to four cold-hot cycles, during which the interrogation centered on the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights. The specific questions that Mr. Bravo recalled focussed on who provides funds to the Permanent Assembly. Bravo noted that his interrogators knew the Assembly had received money from the World Council of Churches. Questions were asked about the foreign connections the Assembly maintains and how the Assembly got its information out of the country. Other questions dealt with the Assembly's contacts with the United States Embassy, the Swedish Embassy, the French Embassy and the Consulate General of Italy. (Bravo mentioned that the Italian Ambassador has been unsympathetic to the human rights problem in Argentina but the Consulate General has been very responsive.)

Bravo was then carried, as he could not walk, and placed on the wooden floor of a small cell. Up a staircase, a friendly voice consoled him (his custodian?) it was only a few steps more. He said he slept for an unknown period of time.

### Third Session

Some time later, Bravo was taken from his cell and brought into a room where there were other prisoners. Bravo said he was told to grab the other prisoners' hands and they formed a circle. Suddenly electricity was passed through the entire group. While he was held in this communal torture room, a woman was raped in the midst of the other (presumably blindfolded) prisoners. A prisoner shouted that the woman being raped was his "companera" (friend), and went beserk and attacked the guards. He was severely beaten. Another man was also beaten severely and was threatened with being killed. Bravo said then one of the guards said "shove your gun up his anus" and suddenly a muffled shot was heard. Bravo said that he believes that the man was killed in the room. During his detention in the room, the entire group was beaten severely (with "pinas", i.e. punches). In response to a question, Bravo said that during his detention in the room his hands

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were free. He noted that generally his hands and feet were not bound except when he was tortured on one or two occasions.

After a stay of an undetermined time in the communal torture room, he was placed in another cell on a cement slab. He recalled that this was the moment of his great crisis. He broke down, sobbed, and then slept. In response to a question, Bravo stated that he had neither food nor water until the end of his interrogations.

#### Fourth Session

At some time later, he was taken and placed in a van with seven or eight other naked prisoners. They were forced to lie down on top of one another on the floor of the van. During the ride, Bravo said the prisoners whispered to each other. He learned that a number of the prisoners were workers from the Peugeot factory near La Plata. One worker said he worked in the mold department; another said his name was Aurelio. The van stopped along the way and some of the prisoners were taken out. He was finally taken out of the van at a third detention facility. There he was subjected to "the submarine". With mock courtesy, being called "Estimado Alfredo" and "Estimado Bravo," Bravo said he was held under water six or seven times until he was writhing for air. He came up gagging for breath. Bravo said that the first two times after he was submarined, he did not have a chance to catch his breath after being pulled out of the water as he was gasping for air in very small breaths. On the third time after he came up, he tried to get as much air into his lungs before his head was forced back under the water. After the repeated submarining, he said he was questioned again about the Permanent Assembly. Specifically, he was questioned regarding the goals of the Permanent Assembly, about the contacts it maintains with other national and international organizations. Bravo recalled that the focus was on Permanent Assembly's connections with the Communists, the Montoneros, the Third World priests and the ERP. Bravo said that after a lengthy questioning period about the general goals and contacts of the Permanent Assembly itself, he was questioned in detail regarding many members of the Assembly's leadership. He was queried regarding Jamie Schmirgeld's and Comte-MacDonald's connections with the Communist Party; Emilio Mignone's connections with

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the Montoneros; and Methodist Bishop Migue Benino (phonetic) connections with the Third World priests. He was asked about the relations between the Assembly and a number of painters, sculptors and writers. Bravo remembered that Julio Cortazar, an Argentine writer exiled in France was a particular subject of questioning. He was also asked about journalist Rodolfo Walsh. He said three persons took turns questioning him during this period. They asked him to identify 20 or 25 names. Some of whom he knew only by their position as they had signed Permanent Assembly appeals, others he did not know at all. The questioning focussed on the covert political and terrorist affiliations of all these individuals. Bravo said this subject became a major element in all his future interrogations. Bravo stated that throughout his interrogation he provided only the minimal amount of information which was publicly available. For example, he said he acknowledged that Mignone was a former Under Secretary at the Ministry of Education, that Comte-MacDonald was a Christian Democrat, and that Schmirgeld was affiliated with the Communist Party. But, Bravo said he had continually denied connections between these Permanent Assembly members and the Montoneros, the Third World priests and the ERP under intensive and repeated questioning as he knew he was telling the truth and if he said what they wanted his fate would be sealed.

#### Session Five

While in the same facility, Bravo stated that he was taken to a room and he was told to shut his eyes and not to open them until he was so ordered. His blindfold was then removed and the vertical adhesive strips removed from his eyes. Then he was told to open his eyes and not to shut them. He said what he saw was a "Dantesque" scene from hell. One person chained to the wall in a crucified position, another woman whose hands had been horribly burned was sobbing while lying on a table; another woman was sitting on a small stool with her hands tied through her legs to a ring on the floor. He was then told "look well, you are a candidate for this, if you do not tell us the true political affiliation of these Assembly people." He was then told that he should rest well and that tomorrow they would talk. He was led back to his cell. When he was struggling up the stairs to his cell (because of his burnt feet), the friendly voice told him "falta poco, arriba".

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Session Six

Bravo stated that he was subsequently taken from his cell and rubber wraps were placed around his wrists and ankles and ropes were tied to his limbs. He was then hung by his arms from the ceiling so that his feet were suspended from the floor in the middle of a room. A piece of wood was strapped between his ankles so he could not move his feet. He was then beaten with (he thinks) a rubber baton and questioned again regarding the covert political affiliation of the Permanent Assembly members and the Assembly's press contacts. Bravo was specifically asked how many meetings he had held with foreign new agencies. During this session Bravo said he had a severe breakdown and begged his torturers to kill him as he did not know anything. During the interrogation, he was asked about a number of people whom he did not know. Some were identified as nuns, others were Jews from the sound of their names. One was a Methodist Minister, Raul Aragon. Bravo mentioned that he was extensively questioned regarding Jorge Pascale, a former priest who currently is the Executive Director of the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights (MEDH) and local representative of the Peace and Justice Movement. Bravo noted that many questions centered on Pascale who was referred to as a turncoat priest as he had left the Church in order to marry.

Bravo commented that his tactic in answering all these questions was to deny all possible information to his questioners and to provide only that information which was publicly known. He felt that if he answered one question affirmatively he would be forced to answer the next question and under torture he could be made to say anything that his captors wanted him to agree to. He feared that if he answered any questions positively it would lead down a path in which he would be killed.

Bravo noted in passing that he believed he had been held by the Provincial Police of Buenos Aires. He said that Provincial Police detention centers are known as "caves" and each has a number such as "cueva numero dos", etc. He said Federal Police detention facilities are called "clubs".

Session Seven

At an unspecified time later, Bravo was taken from his cell and brought to another room. He sensed

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that there were a number of persons around him in a circle. His hands were handcuffed behind him. He was again greeted as "Estimado Bravo" and seated in a chair. He was then beaten severely and repeatedly asked regarding the political affiliation of all the Permanent Assembly and other names which had been raised in previous interrogation sessions. After a break he was again questioned; but this time regarding his relations with Assistant Secretary of State Derian. He was specifically asked about the meetings the Permanent Assembly had with her; the relationship between the Permanent Assembly and the State Department. Bravo denied (falsely) any contact with her. He said that if he had acknowledged ever having met Derian, this would have led to a series of questions and replies which his torturers would force him to agree to. He noted to us that he had met with Mrs. Derian during her first visit to Argentina in the Buenos Aires apartment of Dr. Westercamp with other members of the Permanent Assembly. He remembered that Mrs. Derian was accompanied by a Spanish-speaking, dark-haired person from the Department of State (Rondon).

Bravo at this point recalled that one thing was of comfort to him during all his interrogations was the fact that he had received a special certificate from the government which entailed a full field, Navy and Army clearance. He knew therefore that there was no derogatory information regarding him in the hands of the security services. He emphasized that his torturers, who he presumed to be the Provincial Police of Buenos Aires, did not have details regarding the Derian-Permanent Assembly meeting, other than the fact that it had taken place. He felt that had he been in the hands of the Federal Police or of one of the Military Services, they would have had much better information regarding the Permanent Assembly, himself, and its membership and he would not have been able to deny as much as he did.

#### A Break

That night a large number of persons were brought into the interrogation center. He heard many voices in the large room outside of the cell door. He managed to peer through the crack under the door and saw three or four dressed young people. He learned later that a pipe bomb had been set off on the railway in La Plata and the Provincial Police had conducted a large scale roundup. He was not interrogated for what he believes several days because of the detention center having to process this large number of young suspects. Bravo said that he believes that he was at this time being held in the Regional Provincial Police Station No. 1 of La Plata. During this break, he was told

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to clean his own cell which he described as revolting work as prisoners in the detention facilities were not allowed to use the bathrooms and defecated and urinated on their cell floors. In response to a question, he noted that during the first picana treatment he had completely lost control of his bodily functions but had not lost control during the submarine. He was allowed to bathe. During his shower, he had the first drink of water that he had during his captivity.

#### Session Eight

Some time later Bravo said he was placed in a truck with a number of other naked people and driven outside of La Plata. The truck stopped in a muddy area which probably was a garbage dump, and the passengers were pushed out of the truck. The debris badly hurt his bare feet as he walked on it. He heard the sound of others being beaten. Then many shots were fired, including machine guns. At the conclusion of the firing, he and a few others were led back to the truck. He believes that the others were executed. He noted that during the beatings no one cried out. When he returned to the prison, he was told by his "friendly voice" you are saved ("estas salvada").

#### Session Nine

Later Bravo said he was brought to a room where he was questioned by a person, who he guesses was a military officer. The interrogation was conducted in an entirely different manner as a conversation between two civilized people. Bravo said it was a long session, covering much the same ground that had been covered in the torture sessions. He did not know how many other people were in the room or if there was a tape recorder present. He felt that a door was open as he felt the cold air coming in and could also sense daylight.

#### Session Ten

On what Bravo believes to be September 20, he was given a razor and allowed to shave himself, although his blindfold was not removed. He commented that he had done a poor job shaving off a heavy growth of beard. He was taken out of the detention place clothed and in daylight.

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During the short drive from this place to the next site, the vehicle carrying him waited for a number of minutes for a train to pass. He also noted that the road at one point dropped steeply.

At the next building, he saw through the edges of his blindfold uniformed policemen. Here, he was then asked a number of questions for a formal statement. Bravo said he believes that he was questioned by Colonel Etchecolas, former head bodyguard for ex-Provincial Governor (Peronist labor thug) Calabro. He was startled during this interrogation session because during the questioning regarding his relationship with Walsh, Etchecolas used the phrase "Estimado Bravo" and he recognized the voice as being the same in his first interrogation under the four-prong picana.

#### Session Eleven

Bravo was brought to Buenos Aires Provincial Police Chief Colonel Camps who told him, "You are complicated". Camps threatened Bravo that if he talked of what happened to him he would be found to have committed suicide. Bravo was then put in a cell with a hangman's noose hung from a pipe and left there.

Bravo noted that Col. Camps had pictures of General Rosas and San Martin in his office and a small Nazi flag under the glass of his desk.

#### Bravo's Son Questioned

Mrs. Bravo interjected that her oldest son had gone to La Plata on September 22 about the possibility of the family visiting Mr. Bravo. The Bravo son was interrogated by Col. Etchecolas regarding his father's activities and his books. In response to Bravo son's question as to why his father had been picked up, the Colonel responded that his father was a fine gentlemen who had fronted unwittingly for other people. He had been picked up because he was "the visible head of the Permanent Assembly." The Colonel said the police had interrogated his father, but had not tortured him. The PEN decree on Alfred Bravo was issued on September 20, 1977.

#### Conclusion

Bravo noted that he had heard tales in La Plata Prison which made his treatment look moderate. He stated that his strength to endure the questioning came from the fact that he knew

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he was not involved with terrorism or subversion. He stated that negating everything possible was his only salvation. He added it was not a question of physical will but of psychic will. He noted that he had three serious breakdowns during the 11 days of his interrogation. He said he was no superman and had cried out with pain like any other man. He said that he had provided this information to the Embassy to "show you what you are fighting for." He asked that the Embassy treat this information carefully, "as my life is in your hands."

#### Treatment in La Plata Jail

Bravo stated that the jail conditions in La Plata were severe. A number of the trustees in charge of the prisoners were former AAA members (Right wing terrorists). He stated that he had received only one severe beating while in La Plata Prison before his only outside meeting with John M. Thompson, Secretary General of the World Conference of Organizations of the Teaching Profession.

#### Right of Option

In response to an inquiry from Mr. Freeman regarding his personal safety, Bravo stated that he was not afraid and noted that everyone ran certain risk. He mentioned that on July 5, he and his wife had met with Under Secretary of Interior, Ruis Palacios. At that time, Palacios said that Bravo could have the right of option to leave the country if he would apply for it. Bravo said he told Palacios that he had been offered that opportunity earlier while in prison and found it even less attractive now. Bravo said that he was able to work (but not allowed back to his government teaching job). He could not participate in either his union or human rights activities under the terms of his parole status.

#### Postscript

At a later meeting with Poloff Harris, Bravo said that he wished the report of his experiences to be sent to Secretary Vance and Mrs. Derian, but that he hoped that the information in the report -- sanitized to disguise the source -- would be widely circulated to international organizations, human rights groups and to interested governments. Bravo said that the United States has information experts and he hoped his information would provide them the raw material for making strong and factual reports about the situation in Argentina. Bravo said that he had no fears for his personal safety as the government had done everything to him that it could except kill him. But, he emphasized, he was concerned about his wife and family who are the ones at risk.

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COMMENT: Three theories have circulated as to the reasons for Mr. Bravo's arrest: a) that he was in the process of fomenting a teachers' strike (which had the support and sympathy of many teachers who are wives of members of the Argentine security forces); b) that it was the outgrowth of a meeting with members of an AFL-CIO delegation two days prior to his arrest. (AFL-CIO representatives for some time feared that this was the case); c) that he was a "rabble rouser" for the cause of human rights and had contacts with foreign newsmen (particularly European) interested in playing up the Argentine human rights situation in Europe. (It was widely known, for example, that Bravo told a Norwegian TV team a year and a half ago that there were 30,000 missing or dead in Argentina as a result of the anti-subversion campaign.)

We do not doubt the story he has told us about the ordeals which he underwent during his interrogation. Many of the details in the Bravo report parallel interrogation practices and patterns previously reported to the Embassy by other subjects. The picana, the submarine, beatings, threatened and actual executions, the continual repetition of questions day after day are usual interrogation techniques. We have no reason to doubt Bravo's judgment that he was held by Buenos Aires Provincial Police.

It takes only one meeting with Bravo to recognize that he is a man with exceptional conviction in what he is doing. He describes himself as a fighter in the cause of democracy. He has a vivid hatred for military dictatorships. We understand that the Argentine Government answered an inquiry concerning Bravo's disappearance with the statement "that Bravo was a Marxist teacher." However, this Embassy has no information that Bravo had any connections with terrorist organizations or that he is or was a member of the Communist Party. On the contrary, we have received hints that in the past Bravo has cooperated with military authorities in his capacity as a union leader. We should note that this is very common in Argentina given the political realities here. Bravo may have level Army and Navy "clearances" were factors which gave him courage.

We are awed by Bravo's report that he stood up to the brutal interrogations and denied substantial amounts of information

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to his interrogators which he knew to be true. We do not know what to make of this and at present can only say that Bravo indeed must be an extraordinary man.

Department should be aware that general information regarding Bravo's interrogation is circulating within human rights circles in Buenos Aires. According to Bravo the full details of his mistreatment are not known, only that he was subjected to extensive torture during his interrogation.  
END COMMENT.

Distribution:

P - Under Secretary Newsom  
HA - Ms. Derian  
ARA - Mr. McNeil  
ARA/ECA - Mr. Bumpus  
AMB/DCM  
POL ( [REDACTED] File)

Clearances:

AMB:RCastro (draft)  
DCM:MChaplin (draft)  
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